

Contemporary aesthetics of empathy

Bachelor's Thesis

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“I am interested in placing myself, and the viewer, in a contradictory empathetic space, because I think this is a very just place from which to view the world and try to untangle what we learn from our observations of it. The difficult but crucially important thing is to embrace the empathy, and the contradictions, while finding a way for them to fuel not immobility but a discussion about something new. Finding the new in answering the question “what is to be done.””

- Eric Baudelaire, 2017

“It is often said that we can no longer have an addressee for our political demands. But that’s not true. We have each other. What we can no longer get from the state, the party, the union, the boss, we ask for from one another. And we provide.”

-Brian Kuan Wood, 2017

“I am myself persuaded that there is a superabundance of evidence showing that a refined appreciation of art does not lead to any discernible improvement in the morality of such appreciators. And yet there is a connection, as I see it, between the ability to fully appreciate narrative fiction and the ability to participate in the morality of life, precisely because the ability to imagine oneself to be someone else is a prerequisite for both. It does not follow that one’s moral participation will be improved, however, because the questions remain open, first, of what one reads, and then of what one will do once one has appreciated another person.”

- Ted Cohen, 2008

Table of contents

| | |
|--|----|
| 1. Introduction | 3 |
| 2. Defining empathy | 4 |
| 2.1 Etymological roots | 5 |
| 2.2 Empathetic spectatorship | 6 |
| 3. Empathy as aesthetics - Ed Atkins <i>Ribbons</i> (2014) | 8 |
| 3.1 Watching Dave | 8 |
| 3.2 Self as image | 9 |
| 3.3 Vulnerability | 11 |
| 3.4 Eeriness | 15 |
| 4. Discussion | 17 |
| 4.1 Digitally mediated intimacy | 17 |
| 4.2 For the art educator | 18 |
| 5. Prologue | 20 |
| 6. Works cited | 22 |
| 6.1 Books | 22 |
| 6.2 Articles | 22 |
| 6.3 Visual sources | 24 |

Introduction

The world is growing impossibly unpredictable. Social structures collapse and re-emerge on an endless loop, into a future of state-sanctioned concentration of power in the hands of tech-companies. Threats of nuclear warfare are materializing. Environmental destruction is taking unimaginable shapes. It comes as no surprise, then, that appeals to empathy and compassion have risen to the absolute forefront of public discourses. In a state of constant crisis, where do we look for hope and solace?

Grasping for anything that humans could still offer the planet, empathy is customarily called upon as some kind of balm supposed to soothe our anxieties and clear our view. Large resources of empathy, so the thinking goes, is our best hope of healing ripped-apart social fabrics and reconciling conflicts where interests clash. Indeed, it has been suggested that empathy has become no less than an “Euro-American political obsession” (Pedwell, 2014:ix). Speaking in Chicago on Martin Luther King Day, 21 January 2002, president Barack Obama suggested that the US was facing “an empathy shortage (...) more serious than the federal budget deficit.”¹ Obama spoke of compassion often, calling upon the nation to come together and see each other through times of upheaval and unrest. In keeping with the politics of hope that captured the imagination of the nation, Obama was often caught on camera smiling, laughing, giving someone a hug. All the while, during his first year in the White House, Obama allegedly ordered ten times more drone strikes than George W. Bush did during the whole of his presidency (Purkiss & Serle, 2017).

In the West, established political systems are felt to fall further and further away from grace and dignity, let alone democracy. Allegedly representative politics are exposed as ever more fragile, principles of parliamentarism prove vulnerable to fraught logic, social welfare services are steadily being dismantled. People are looking elsewhere for support and guidance. For the purposes of this paper, I consider artistic production and cultural consumption as part and parcel of that ‘elsewhere’, following the claim by Maria Walsh that cultural production in the global West has become “a site of transformation and hope in lieu of organised politics.” (2017).

Communities formed around subcultures and other marginalized forms of life and artistic expression have long experimented at the periphery of established political life. It also appears that the commercial, contemporary art world is more than ever keen on presenting itself as a prime site for radical emancipation. In recent years, artistic projects dedicated to human understanding and dignity have been abundant in several established art nodes of the global West². It is particularly telling that the most recent edition of documenta, the world’s arguably

¹“Obama 2002 MLK speech: Full video”, *YouTube*, uploaded by morgenr, 3 October 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=CAbQvJrDVv0

² The 2001 international show *Empathy - Beyond The Horizon* was hosted by Pori Art Museum and Sydney’s ArtSpace respectively. Empathy served as the leitmotif for the 2017 edition of the international, artistically experimental donaufestival held annually in Austria. A year later, the prestigious Ghebaly Gallery in downtown Los Angeles staged a group show titled *The Pain of Others*, drawing on Susan Sontag’s influential essay on suffering. In London, visitors have the chance to experience the world’s first empathy museum launched in 2015.

weightiest contemporary art fair, stretched a limb across from Kassel to Greece, under the premises of “Learning From Athens”. documenta’14 was loudly criticized for what was seen as a hypocritical, neocolonialist spirit of its move to Athens, a European epicentre of transnational capital in crisis - nevertheless, it was the first time in its history that documenta held its opening outside of Germany. Its leitmotif of learning, however successfully implemented, suggests humbleness and surrendering authority to that which is imagined as operating at the peripheries of global capital.

Looking out for friends, ‘learning’ from those who suffer hardship, finding each other in the midst of crisis - these are some of the ways in which the contemporary art world attempts to counter the alienation of financial and political globalization. Of course, the close tie between empathy and art has long been pointed out by professional art educators. It comes as no surprise that within my own department at Aalto University, empathy is repeatedly thrown around as a dignifying virtue of art education. Larger capacities of empathy is envisioned as one of its most weighty promise. But what is it exactly about visual art and aesthetic education that is thought to engage and cultivate empathy? How might works of art activate, cultivate or, better still, call into question our empathetic capacities? Above all, what is empathy and how does it work?

I will turn to discourse analysis and phenomenological research strategies in order to work through these questions in reference to the work *Ribbons* (2014) by British artist and writer Ed Atkins. Atkins has explored intimacy in digitally mediated surroundings for several years. Often working with facial motion capturing technology and 3D-modelling, the artist produces audio-visual pieces hovering between the hyper-real and unapologetically fake. Based on my own experience of *Ribbons*, I will draw on scholarship in visual culture, photography and phenomenology to tease out three key strategies at work in *Ribbons*, all of which relate significantly, I argue, to the questions of empathy and aesthetics outlined above. For purposes of clarity, I will first review the concepts of empathy and spectatorship central to the study, proceeding then to a discussion of *Ribbons*. Hereafter, I will make three suggestions for how art educators might bring *Ribbons* into their classrooms, in dialogue with other works of art. Finally, I will loop back to Obama’s politics of hope and the work of Carolyn Pedwell in order to meditate on the emancipatory, transformative potential of empathy.

2. Defining empathy

Empathy has been investigated across the spectrums of academic and scientific inquiry. Depending on cultural context and agenda, empathy has been understood as political good, social glue, anti-racist and feminist strategy, survival instinct or else malevolent trap leading us into cruelty. In the past decades, empathy has become a concern also for neuroscientists. The identification of mirror neurons in the human brain at the turn of the 20th century was celebrated as a long overdue discovery of the neurological basis for empathy (Jeffers, 2009:19). However, the contemporary understanding of empathy has its origins in 19th century German

scholarship on art, visual culture and aesthetics (Reynolds & Reason, 2011). Since they are commonly used interchangeably, in the following chapters I will tease out distinctions between empathy and sympathy. I will also propose a more specific understanding of empathy as it relates to visual experience and spectatorship.

2.1 Etymological roots

Empathy has its etymological roots in the Greek *empathēia* (em- ‘in’ + pathos ‘feeling’), which literally means *passion*. The idea of being ‘in’ something (presumably containing, by default, a mode of being ‘out’ of something) discernible in the Greek origin also infuses the contemporary sense of the word, which relies on distinctly modern ideas of projection and intersubjectivity. The very first entry for “empathy” in the Merriam Webster online dictionary (2018) reads:

“1 :the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner; also: the capacity for this”

Indeed, *vicariously* experiencing means experiencing by way of imagination, by way of projection, through another. The modern sense of the word as “projecting oneself into the object of contemplation” first emerged in the late 19th century in an essay on optics and aesthetics by the German philosopher Robert Vischer. Vischer drew an hitherto undescribed distinction between *verstehen* (understanding) and what he coined as *Einfühlung*, literally ‘feeling into’ the object of contemplation. As fellow German philosopher and popular university professor Theodor Lipps picked up on the concept, advancing it in his own work on art and aesthetic experience, *Einfühlung* gained traction also in other academic contexts. However, the concept of empathy has continued to be influential in matters pertaining to aesthetics, particularly in the field of movement, dance and choreography. (Reynolds & Reason, 2011:19).

Empathy is commonly but mistakenly mixed up with its cousin, sympathy. While empathy is pegged on the idea of projection, the definition of sympathy emphasizes lived similarity and shared experience. Spanning eight entries in the Merriam Webster online dictionary, the first entry for ‘sympathy’ reads “an affinity, association, or relationship between persons or things wherein whatever affects one similarly affects the other”; and, in a later entry “the act or capacity of entering into or sharing the feelings of interests of another”. It appears that sympathy has less to do with efforts of imagination, but rather hinges on identification through sharing; already having something in common. Less a matter of perspective-taking, or “talent for metaphor” as philosopher Ted Cohen (2008) puts it, sympathy is a relation to, or with, something that is already known .

2.2 Empathetic spectatorship

This paper considers empathy in relation to aesthetic experience, foregrounding visual perception: watching, being watched and the effects produced by these practices. In my discussion of Ed Atkins' *Ribbons*, I will rely primarily on the model of empathetic identification in looking proposed by David Benin and Lisa Cartwright in their article *Shame, Empathy and Looking Practices: Lessons from a Disability Studies Classroom* (2006). The article examines shame as a primary site for generating a politically sound disability politics extending beyond pure compassion and pity. Taking as their point of departure a past teaching situation in which students respond to Diane Arbus' *Masked Woman in a Wheelchair* (1970), the authors elaborate the relationships between looking practices, shame and empathy. Their discussion draws on the writings of empirical psychologist Silvan Tomkins, who was particularly preoccupied with the structure and function of shame. Tomkins suggests shame to be intricately bound up the visual field and, through the visual field, with desire. Following Tomkins, Benin and Cartwright suggest that looking and being looked at is a social act rooted essentially in pleasure and enjoyment (2006:161).

Meanwhile, the intertwining of pleasure and gazing has of course become a commonplace tenet in scholarship on visual culture, often summarized in the idea of voyeurism. As Alison Dean notes in her essay on intimacy in the photography of Nan Goldin and Rineke Dijkstra, voyeurism is often imagined at one end of a moral spectrum, empathy being its assumed opposite. Dean (2015:177) describes this allegedly clear-cut line between morally sanctioned and unsanctioned practices as "...an ethical debate that hangs over nearly every depiction of human bodies, particularly those of women." . As scholars of visual culture, voyeurism does not go unnoticed by Benin and Cartwright. However, the point of the authors is that even so, voyeuristic practices cannot be fully understood unless the question of shame is worked through properly. Simply accusing someone of voyeurism will not help build a sustainable politics of visibility and, as the authors suggest, disability.

Following Tomkins, Benin and Cartwright (2006:164) suggest that shame is constituted in a rupture in the pleasurable circuit of looking: it is when this circuit is interrupted, interest reduced and the path to enjoyment blocked, that shame takes hold of us. Here, in this moment of obstruction, when we avert our gaze, is where the authors insert the core issue of identification:

"What is blocked, we propose, is not pleasure per se, but *the ability to identify* in the strict sense. Shame is strongly linked to pity and compassion responses, we suggest, because the shame process circumvents identification with the body represented."

In the case considered by the authors, the body represented is of course the woman in Arbus' photograph, posing in a wheelchair in front of a Pennsylvania mental institution, concealing her face with a child's witch mask. When the students in Benin's and Cartwright's classroom look away at the sight of the photograph, an interruption takes place in the flow of gazes, the students

looking at each other looking at the woman in the image looking back at them. Elaborating on this moment of interruption, the authors go on to suggest that it is in fact *empathy* that is obstructed, it is the desire to empathetically identify that is blocked. Somewhat paradoxically, it is however also the case that when the spectator looks down in shame, directing the gaze inwards, reflecting on their feelings, it is precisely empathy they are working towards (*ibid*:162-165). Empathy is envisioned not as a thing possessed, something that can be cultivated and ‘had’ in an intimate, subjective sense. Rather, empathy is understood in a porous sense as essentially relational, something that is produced in circulation (Pedwell 2014:47-50). In this way then, Benin and Cartwright extend Tomkins theory of shame to propose their own model of empathetic identification, allowing for a poignant consideration of the photographic image:

“(...) in empathy there is a force in that moment when, in thinking I know how the subject in the image feels, I do not need to know about that subject or identify with her. I do not imagine myself to ‘see from her position’. Rather, in empathy, my ‘knowledge’ comes from the force of the object (the image, the representation), and my reciprocal sense that I recognise the feeling I perceive in its expression. The photograph of a human subject moves me to imagine the feelings of the other but the feelings may not match feelings I understand myself to have.” (2006:165)

The authors distinguish here between sympathetic mode and empathetic modes of identifying with a (human) body in an image. In a bond that is sympathetic, I, the spectator, imagine myself to *feel and see as the other feels and sees*. This is a mirroring relationship. What Benin and Cartwright describe above is instead a projective relationship in which I, the spectator, am *moved*, propelled by a force emanating from the image to project in myself the feelings of the other - I am being *made to feel* like the other. Empathy springs from this effort of imagination. In the empathetic mode of identification, my ‘knowledge’ is not dependent on identifying in myself the feelings experienced by the other (*I feel how you feel*). Rather, the ‘source of knowledge’ in empathy lies within the beheld object itself: the image, the representation. The object draws the spectator into its realm (moral or otherwise) by an innate force.

The force of the image envisioned in Benin and Cartwright could be likened to what Arnold, Martin and Greer (2014:334) call the “feeling tone” of an artwork . I understand these rather vague-sounding concepts as attempts at capturing something true about the agency of a work of art. To add to these, consider Rajchman’s reading of Gilles Deleuze pondering the pre-reflective, tingly coming-together of sensations that characterizes encounters with works of art:

“The being of sensation is what can only be sensed, since there precisely pre-exists no categorical unity, no *sensus communis* for it. At once more material and less divisible than sense data, it requires a synthesis of another, non-categorical sort, found in artworks, for example.” (Rajchman 2001:9, quoted in Kozel 2007:21)

Much of experience simply cannot be clothed in speech; neither collected nor measured in a quantitative sense. And that is precisely how aesthetic sensations may open up windows for

going over and beyond ourselves - in action, imagination or otherwise. In other words, it's how aesthetics connects to the ethical realm.

3. Empathy as aesthetics - Ed Atkins' *Ribbons*

Ribbons is a three-channel HD video work by the British artist Ed Atkins from 2014³. The work consists of audio, text and images revolving around the avatar Dave. In the following chapters, I will contemplate my own experience of *Ribbons* in order to consider three aspects of the ambivalence surrounding Dave: his status as digital simulation, his performance of vulnerability and, finally, the eeriness produced by these features respectively.⁴

3.1 Watching Dave

I experienced *Ribbons* in spring 2017 during a visit to Kiasma show ARS17, an impressive display of contemporary art engaging with the shift towards total digitalization of life. *Ribbons*, which has been on view both on single and multiple screens, was rigged in Kiasma in the form of a single-channel installation in a white, dimmed room empty except for the big single screen in front of which I sat down on the floor. Atkins was a vaguely familiar name to me at the time. In my mind, I had compartmentalized his name as belonging to the young crowds putting out work that art writers like to call 'post-internet art'. In the seamless execution of Atkin's digitally produced environment, I recognized references to digital gaming worlds and immersive virtual reality environments. What was most striking to me about *Ribbons* however was how disoriented I felt about its male protagonist, Dave.

Dave, "this sort of skinhead guy" as Atkins puts it, is a customized 3D avatar purchased off of the Internet. Indeed the first thing one notices about the avatar is his naked skin covered with a pattern of tattoos referencing some collective image of what a young, white trash male looks like. Here is Atkins explaining what it means to purchase an avatar off the web:

"Technically, practically, it's a 3-D model that I bought online and then customised. So when you get him it's basically a zipped up folder of big image files that constitute his skin and a lot of data that tells you how he might move in response to the way that you animate him."⁵

For *Ribbons*, Atkins used facial capture technology and 3D-modeling to map recordings of himself moving, speaking, grunting and singing onto the purchased data, crafting Dave into something in-between image and live body. Atkins stages Dave in digitally produced milieus: bars, unidentified rooms sometimes only present in the shape of walls. These surroundings form

³ Ed Atkins, *Ribbons*, 2014, three-channel HD video, color, sound, 13 minutes 18 seconds.

⁴ ARS17 Hello World! was on view in Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma 31.03.2017- 14.01.2018.

⁵ "ARS17 - Ed Atkins" *YouTube*, uploaded by Kiasma Museum, May 9 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3vDyaZXx28

the backdrop against which Dave moves through a sequence of vignettes; singing, urinating, slouching over bar tables, talking directly to the camera, peeking through holes or pushing parts of his body through them. In between the scenes featuring Dave, Atkins works with text and sound that vaguely resemble the very familiar dramaturgy of video games, advertisement clips and promotion videos. There are references to an array of different narratives, but the work remains collage-like without an easily detectable master narrative.

Watching *Ribbons*, I oscillated between irritation and pity; now thinking Dave absolutely obnoxious in his helplessness, now feeling sorry for this lost soul who clearly cannot help himself. I felt in turn agitated, indifferent, ashamed and concerned. Dave enacts an abstracted version of something the viewer might agree to think of as a person, yet the question of authenticity remains ambivalent. This ambivalence lies at the very core of the artwork, prompting questions about subjectivity and objectification and intimacy that help us understand how empathy enters the viewer's experience of *Ribbons*.

3.2 Self as image

As we have seen, empathy is commonly understood as an intersubjective relationship, forged through a projection of the experience of another into the self. Interestingly, the Merriam Webster online dictionary (2018) tells us that empathy also can be defined as “the imaginative projection of a subjective state into an object so that the object appears to be infused with it”. Empathy, then, is also the state in which subjectivity bleeds into inanimate objects in our surroundings, connecting us to them in an affective bond. Carolyn Pedwell has noted that, as psychotherapy and psychoanalysis emerged in 20th century Europe and North America, understandings of empathy indeed gravitated closer to the advancing idea of the individual, private psyche hidden from sight. Therefore, contemporary understandings of empathy are bound up with the idea of gaining access to another person's inner life. In the intellectual climate of 19th century where the concept originates however, empathy was not understood to bear primarily on our experience of fellow humans, but inanimate objects as well (2014:6).

Whether or not and to what extent it is possible for humans to feel empathy for an inanimate object is a major debate stretching across scientific and academic disciplines. A review of these debates clearly lies beyond the scope of this paper. I want to begin here, however, by putting the question in a slightly different way: what happens to our empathetic capacities in encounters with objectified representations of human subjects, such as photographs or other kinds of digitally simulated images? This is of course the very same question that Benin and Cartwright pose and begin to answer in their model of empathetic spectatorship, as outlined above. The core of their argument is that the inner force of the image elicits in the viewer a reciprocal sense of first perceiving, and recognizing the feeling expressed by the human subject depicted. This relationship with the image forms the beginning of empathetic affection in looking practices. Yet Benin and Cartwright consider photographs of human subjects exclusively. Seeing that, unlike a photograph of a person, Dave is a digital simulation originating almost wholly from within a

computer-mediated environment, is the model of Benin and Cartwright helpful in making sense of *Ribbons*?

First of all, it is important to note that a photograph re-produces reality in a way that, although it too is constructed, claims for itself some kind of truth-value, or authenticity. This is why ethical questions of objectification and representation have long been central to lens-based forms of image-making, above all else in the tradition of portrait photography. Pondering a series of photographs depicting young, naked mothers by the artist Rineke Dijkstra, Alison Dean writes:

“Her young, naked, and vulnerable subjects are removed from the context of their personal lives; the portraits call attention to photographic mediation by offering their subjects, as images, to the viewer.” (2015:180)



Image source: Thomson, Allese. “Ed Atkins discusses Ribbons.” *artforum*. 18 August 2014. <www.artforum.com/interviews/ed-atkins-discusses-ribbons-47876> Accessed 9 April 2018.

According to Dean then, part of what makes up Dijkstra's photographs is a significant absence of the intimate context of a human life. Dean seems to suggest that Dijkstra's photographs do not in fact pretend to be able to convey personhood. There is something about the way the artist constructs her photographs, Dean proposes, that is perfectly in keeping with the idea of portrait photography while at once undermining that very idea, conveying instead a resistance to the desire for representation, truth and piercing insight that the camera lens harbours. In a gesture highlighting the referential nature of photographs, Dijkstra's portraits are alive, paradoxically, by way of absence.

Because he exists, materially, as pure digitally mediated image and sound, Dave is sheer representation: a summation of references to known contesting narratives and visual repertoires distilled into one single character. Unlike a photograph of a human subject, the avatar references no one in particular. Unlike a photograph of a human subject, the image of Dave is alive in a visceral sense: he talks, sings, moves, expresses desires and curiosity, he makes faces and laughs, he looks straight into the camera, urinates into his liquor glass and smokes cigarettes, he sheds tears. If the innate force of Rineke Dijkstra's portraits presides in absence, Atkins employs the opposite strategy of oversaturation, staging the avatar in an amplified performance of personhood that intentionally crosses the boundaries of subtlety. Dave addresses the viewer directly in speech, he makes pleas to the viewer with a tinge of desperation, he stares back, he knows someone is watching. To top it all off, in one of the vignettes Dave tenderly sings the lyrics to a well-known tune by Randy Newman: *human kindness overflowing / and I think it's going to rain today*⁶. Another crucial moment in the video is when Dave lays down his head on a bar table to rest. Suddenly, his head and face are deflated, like a balloon turning into a raggedy mass of loose skin. The performance of the avatar is humanlike, yet his appearance is blatantly fake. Because Atkins takes care to remind his viewer that Dave is no more than a temporarily animated shell, the avatar's deeply human display of sensitivity is overshadowed by a sense of someone faking.

The paradoxical result is this: the more Dave expresses himself, the more intimate he gets, the more alienating it all feels, the more insincere he appears. This is how Atkins manages to draw his viewer into what film director Eric Baudelaire (see Gritz, 2017) calls a “contradictory empathetic space”, in which the audience's feelings and sense-making strategies are triggered and undermined at once. Returning to the model of empathetic spectatorship posited by Benin and Cartwright, in the case of *Ribbons*, the work of empathy delegated to the viewer is not so much struggling to imagine the feeling expressed in the human subject of an image. Dave, the artificial shell, unapologetically communicates moods, emotions, thoughts. In fact, he communicates a little bit too much a little too well. Dave feels every bit alive when he really should not. This is what the viewer has to work with: accepting the contradiction, highlighted by the artist, between manifest artificiality and claims to authenticity.

3.3 Vulnerability

Understandings of empathy that rely primarily on theories of intersubjectivity risk overlooking emphatic dimensions that are more direct, or sensory in nature. Slipping into the skin of another, stepping into someone else's shoes - these commonplace metaphors speak to the prominence of the body in everyday understandings of empathy. Among all scholarly disciplines, it is the phenomenological approach that most readily recognizes its powerful corporeal dimension. Phenomenological writings on empathy do not by any means dismiss the notion of subjectivity, but rather thinks it embedded in the experience of being alive in a body.

⁶ Newman, Randy. “I Think It's Going to Rain Today.” *Randy Newman*, Reprise Records, 1968.

In a study of the affective sciences and theories of mind, Giovanna Colombetti outlines a phenomenological approach to subjectivity that departs from the idea of the essentially private mind. Access to others happens not through simulations or “pretend states”. Instead, emphasizing embodiment and living ‘through’ the body, phenomenologists propose something of a primordial response to others that is constituted in feeling and experience. Here, Colombetti draws on the writings of the early 20th century German phenomenologist Edith Stein to introduce a distinction between mere physical things (*Körper*) and lived bodies (*Leibe*). Lived bodies, *Leibe*, are to be understood as “living centers or sources of subjectivity”. Phenomenology envisions empathy as a feeling in to, or tuning in to the other through the shared experience of inhabiting living bodies. Colombetti admits that there are instances in which empathy requires a resort to other forms of knowledge and imagination, but does not discuss this in further detail (2014:173-176).

Colombetti exclusively considers live encounters between humans. Still, the distinction between mere *Körper* and *Leibe* is useful in trying to making sense of the premises on which the viewer encounters Dave. In accordance with the phenomenological line of thought, the body is the living seat of subjectivity. In Joan Copjec’s reading of Freud, the body is understood as the seat primarily of sex (2002:29). On an even more basic level though, if life is understood as a suspension of imminent death, the living body is first and foremost the seat of biological death. Accordingly, the shared experience of inhabiting live bodies as conceptualized by Edith Stein also entails a shared vulnerability over against an unpredictable, possibly lethal world. Tuning into another by way of empathy in the phenomenological sense, then, raises a crucial question of vulnerability in relation to the body.

In light of these considerations, it would seem that Dave’s hyperreal appearance alone brings difficulties for the viewer to mobilize empathy. The techno genetic, digitally manipulated body of the avatar is an image oversaturated not in colour, but in glossiness. Dave’s muscular, light-skinned torso is at once intimidating and disarming. The camera zooms in and out on Dave’s face and body, revealing the pores of his skin and its small miscolourings. Yet in the cold light, the feeling of living flesh is lost in translation, a sensation of sleek plastic taking its place instead. The difference in textures is democratized such that Dave’s hand appears to be made up of more or less the same mass as the glass of whiskey it is holding. In fact, the glossiness of *Ribbons* resembles the appeal of the commodity in a window display, untouched and, most importantly, untouchable. Not only is the encounter with Dave mediated by a physical screen, but the materiality of the video conjures in itself the feeling of matted glass.

Film theorist Laura Mark has postulated the helpful notions of mimetic spectatorship and ‘haptic visibility’ to describe the experience of watching digitally mediated images on screen, moments in which “...the gaze roams or ‘grazes’ along the surface of the image or object. The emphasis here is on discerning texture, as opposed to depth or form.” (Mark 2000:163, quoted in Dean 2015:187). Watching, then, can be understood as touching in a physical sense. Because *Ribbons* offers close to no variation in texture, the viewer’s gaze glides smoothly back and forth

across the screen. Thus the viewer is allowed to contemplate the images, and Dave, as objects instead of being drawn into narrative. Surface becomes the fullest expression of reality, a condition which writer and visual artist Hannah Black skillfully captures in her essay on subjectivity and embodiment produced from within the alienation of neoliberal ideology. Introducing the “Hot Babe”, Black writes:

“Let’s say the Hot Babe is the fully human being of the future, apparently lacking all interiority, super-connected, ultra-contemporary, without guilt or grief. (...) The Hot Babe is the embodiment of the flatness and emptiness of the image, but the very flatness and emptiness of the image, any image, is its uncanny fullness.” (2013)



Image sources:

Left: <www.award.faber-castell.com/ed-atkins-drawings-videos-performances.html> Accessed 9 April 2018.

Right: “Now Showing: Ed Atkins and Wael Shawky at Cestello Di Rivoli Museo Di Arte Contemporanea”. *Elephant Magazine*. 4 November 2016 <www.elephant.art/now-showing-ed-atkins-wael-shawky-castello-di-rivoli-museo-di-arte-contemporanea/> Accessed 9 April 2018.

Black’s Hot Babe is a feminine-coded form of existence, whose condition of being in the world is equal to the condition of existing purely as image, on screen. Dave fits this condition, too. Of course Dave really does exist strictly within the confines of the image, which suggests that Atkins is very much concerned with questions of authenticity and intimacy in contemporary life mediated by screens. Furthermore, Dave’s body is strictly coded as a generically white, buff heterosexual man with pale blue eyes and a shaved blond head. His demeanor is tough, liquor in his hand, cigarette butt hanging from his lips. This in turn suggests that Atkins is interested also in masculine forms of existence.

As I have argued in the previous chapter, the character of Dave is a ground for contesting narratives and popularized visual tropes to play out. Possibly the most prominent trope is that of a white, young, underdog male reaching out (to the viewer) in a state of sudden weakness or, given the abundance of poured whiskey, intoxication. The narrative is complicated by the story told by Dave's skin. It is criss-crossed with something that look like DIY stick n poke tattoos. They cover his exposed torso, his hands and his forehead, all in black. White skin stretched tight over muscles, inscribed with sloppily designed self-made tattoos may trigger collective ideas of what, say, a petty criminal or prisoner looks like on a formal level. At the same time, Dave's tattoos speak of desperation, isolation and a troubled sense of self. They read like small labels, some self-deprecating like "ASS HOLE", "FML"; others read like reassuring mantras such as "DON'T DIE", "HELP" and "XXX". Once again, Alison Dean's writing on the photography of Rineke Dijkstra proves helpful to think about the generous display of skin in *Ribbons*. Dean writes:

"Skin functions as a border and a boundary; it is also porous and receptive. Skin also marks the subject, one way or another, in visual representations, providing external marks tracing one's personal history (scars, wrinkles) and markers of one's internal, genetic make-up..." (Dean 2015:181)



Image source: Nyberg, Patrik. "Kohtaamisia digimaailman ja tosimaailman rajapinnalla: Ed Atkinsin Ribbons". *Kiasma-blogi*.12 May2017. <blog.kiasma.fi/blog/kohtaamisia-digimaailman-ja-tosimaailman-rajapinnalla-ed-atkinsin-ribbons/> Accessed 9 April 2018.

Showing skin is a very intimate form of exposure, which is ultimately ambivalent. It might speak of confidence, especially in the case of young well-trained males that look like Dave. In the case of Dave, showing skin covered in raw tattoos speaks rather to a longing for exposing the self in all its repulsiveness and naked weakness. If, as Dean suggests, the skin places the subject within a context of personal history, then the history told by Dave's tattoos appears a violent one. At the same time however, it is tempting to banish the whole tattoo-thing as overdone, ridiculous even. I recall thinking the tattoos somehow too much, dismissing Dave as someone who indulges in their own show of helplessness. Yet again, the contradiction arises between authenticity and artificiality, leaving the viewer to wrestle with conflicting feelings.

3.4 Eeriness

I have argued that the fusion of computer-generated imagery and organic corporeality in the character of Dave creates conflicts that complicate the viewer's readiness to empathize with him. These conflicts flow from a wavering sense of authenticity that is built into the very core of Atkin's piece. In an astute observation for *The Guardian*, Adrian Searle writes of Dave: "You wouldn't approach this guy on the street. There is something worrying about the mobility of the mouth, those perfect teeth, the eyes that dart about as though through holes in a mask." Searle touches upon what I have suggested to be the accentuated objecthood of the avatar which is very close to passing for what Sarah Whatley describes as a "fleshy, feeling, intentional and sensing entity" (2011:265). Alas, something about Dave is absolutely off.

The field of robotics provides a helpful insight into this crooked resemblance that propels uncertain feelings and, as in Searle's case, worry. Masahiro Mori, then robotics professor at the Tokyo Institute of Technology, first formulated what would be known as the Uncanny Valley hypothesis in an essay originally printed in the Japanese magazine *Energy* in 1970. Pondering contemporary efforts at creating an "artificial human", Mori predicted that robots achieving an almost but not fully seamless likeness to humans will remain eerie. Mori proposed a hypothetical curve to describe the relationship between the degree of an object's human resemblance and the affective responses of its audience. According to the curve, the (human) observer's affinity increases in proportion to increasing (human) likeness (Mori concerned himself exclusively with mechanical devices, but the hypothesis was later also applied beyond the field robotics). Cases in which mechanical devices reach an *almost* complete human likeness fall within a sudden dip in Mori's curve. It is this dip that Mori called the Uncanny Valley (2012). Mori's article did not gain traction until in recent decades, as computer animation technologies have advanced rapidly. Scientists of the most varying disciplines have picked up the original hypothesis, reviewing it against themes in philosophy, psychology and popular culture. Researchers in psychology have been particularly interested in collecting empirical evidence in support of Mori's proposal with continuously inconsistent results (Kätsyri, Förger, Mäkräinen & Takala, 2015).

The concept of the uncanny emerged in 19th century Europe in the thought of Sigmund Freud. It has since been explored thoroughly in writings particularly on aesthetics. Literary and cultural theorist Nicholas Royle writes of the uncanny:

“The uncanny involves feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced. It is a crisis of the natural, touching upon everything that one might have thought was ‘part of nature’: one’s own nature, human nature, the nature of reality and the world. (...) More specifically, it is a peculiar comingling of the familiar and unfamiliar.” (2003:1)

According to Royle then, uncanny experiences are of an existential character. The encounter with Dave on the screen is essentially uncanny in this sense. *Ribbons* is not a didactic piece, yet it brings out powerful tensions between embodiment and disembodiment, artificial and authentic, virtue and vice. Or rather, these supposedly opposing concepts are blurred into one another such that the viewer is asked to occupy many different perspectives all at once. In fact, as Sarah Whatley points out, the divide between the ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ is not to be understood as absolutely oppositional. In her text on kinesthetic empathy and virtual dancing bodies, Whatley wonders whether a virtual environment could not be experienced by the viewer as in fact sensual, physical and material as opposed to disembodied and abstract. Arriving at a discussion of interactive viewing environments, propelling the viewer to enter into an “attentive relationship” with the mover, Whatley asks:

“In the live encounter, audiences may be more attuned to the dancer’s corporeality, potential vulnerability and even injure. So in a virtual environment, does the viewer attend to the virtual body differently? Do spectators continue to bring a reading of vulnerability to their encounter with the virtual dancer? Or might the nature of the interaction in the virtual environment mean that a condition of vulnerability is transferred to the viewer? Such is the blurring of the real and the virtual.” (2011:266-267)

Whatley concludes that in comparison to live encounters, interacting with digitally produced bodies within immersive virtual environments might in fact hold the greatest promise for transformation. In the case of *Ribbons*, it is precisely the contradiction that harbours a potential for deep reflection. Really, the work of the viewer is overcoming alienation, reconciling the contradictory empathetic space produced in *Ribbons*. As I have argued, Atkins operates a double-move. The viewer is asked to suspend disbelief, allowing themselves to be moved by what’s happening on screen. When I project into myself the cluelessness and self-disdain performed by Dave, that’s an act of empathy. Yet I am also asked to call into question that very act of giving in to the narratives on offer. It matters little, then, whether I think Dave is sincere, or in some way real. What matters is how I cope with the confusion.

4. Discussion

In the previous chapters, I have argued that the ambivalence built into *Ribbons* originates in conflicting bonds of simultaneous affection and alienation between the viewer and the avatar Dave. I have also suggested that it is precisely in the ambivalence that empathy can begin to circulate in meaningful ways. I will elaborate this conclusion in the following chapters. Bringing *Ribbons* into a broader cultural framework, I first consider the piece in the light of contemporary discourses of intimacy and self-development. Secondly, I consider the implications of my findings for art educators, suggesting further paths of research into empathy, aesthetics and pedagogy.

4.1 Digitally mediated intimacy

Ribbons raises the question of authenticity on the level both of appearance and display of feeling. Atkins purposefully casts his protagonist in a shady light which draws the viewer into a state of undecidedness. When considered within a larger framework of social and cultural politics, it appears that *Ribbons* touches on something perfectly timely. In a world abounding with well-masked agendas and highly sophisticated tools of manipulation, can we trust images? Can we trust things that play out on screens? Do people mean what they say? In her essay on two contemporary moving image works, Maria Walsh (2017) discusses how the fusion of digital technology and neoliberalist capitalism has come to produce a swaying sense of truth and, in its wake, a desire for new forms of authenticity:

“The performance of public acts of sincerity is key to this new kind of authenticity, which is desirous of personal, if not societal, change. (...) Transformation in this context is infused with popularised therapeutic discourses of self-development and recovery which are presented on reality television and online media support forums.”

According to Walsh, the most beloved narratives of the present are those of personal relapse and recuperation in what Walsh calls “therapeutic makeover narratives” (2017). Echoing Walsh’s analysis, Lauren Berlant writes: “In modern discourse, therapy and confessional discourse have also ‘become internal to the modern, mass-mediated sense of intimacy’” (Berlant 2000:2, quoted in Dean 2015:179). Intimacy is imagined as the opposite of locating the self outside of social exchange, confidentiality is most intimate when publicly performed. Hannah Black’s essay springs to mind as she writes: “What is private, secret, is not the detail of the life but the disappearance at its core.” (2013).

In all his pitiful repulsiveness, Dave is clearly steeped in confessional discourse. Not only does Atkins write a story of insecurity and existential turbulence on the avatar’s skin, the artist also makes Dave articulate his troubles in a disinterested voice, asking the viewer for advice. Atkins drives the confessional gear up to a maximum and keeps Dave in limbo, on the verge of some imminent collapse. It remains unclear whether recovery is anywhere in sight, or what that would

even look like. Thus, while Atkins certainly concerns himself with the issues raised by Walsh, Berlant and Black alike, I understand *Ribbons* not so much as a critique. By critique I mean working in reference to an analysis rather than observations. Rather, objectification of the self through overexposure is built into *Ribbons* in an attempt to understand something new about the conditions of life in a visually oriented, neoliberal economy. Atkins complicates things further by wondering, through Dave, what it looks like when a buff white male attempts confidentiality, wearing his heart on his sleeve as it were? Mustering pity for Dave requires little effort. Empathy, as Benin and Cartwright have suggested, is a process that demands work, overcoming initial impulses and emotions. Atkins asks about the conditions on which that work can begin to take place, if at all.

4.2 For the art educator

I have argued that *Ribbons* is concerned with the politics of images, digital representation and empathy. These matters have informed my own studies in art education at Aalto University in a significant way since the very start. Tuning in to social and cultural shifts within visual culture, the field of art education is moving further away from honing technical skills, focusing instead on developing the student's cognitive and analytical skills. Due to the digitalization of close to every aspect of life, media pedagogy and visual literacy has emerged as vital aspects of art education at large. These points of resonance between Atkins' work and contemporary currents within art education makes *Ribbons* an excellent class-room case (although, because of the smoking, drinking and showing of genitals on screen, the work should be discussed with older students). *Ribbons* offers gateways into important discussions of the student's own participation in image-economies such as social media or (online) gaming communities.

With regards to social media, discussing *Ribbons* in light of Amalia Ulman's online performance *Excellences and Perfections* (2014) appears a promising pedagogical move. Ulman used her own Instagram account to enact a carefully researched and scripted series of events, letting her online persona pass through a series of female stereotypes before revealing the trick to her followers. The piece reads as a comment on the work that goes into creating and curating an attractive online persona that still manages to pass for authentic. The paradox is that creating an perfect surface, complete in its apparent effortlessness, requires hard work. And a great deal of money. The parallels to *Ribbons* are apparent in the themes of authenticity and intimacy. In Ulman's work, they are both made transparent. When at the end of the performance, Ulman's Instagram account goes dead, her followers are left in disbelief. The artist reflects back to her audience their own desires for looking at a certain type of (female) body doing certain things in certain settings. Is Ulman's performance a form of digital manipulation? Is oversharing details of a life a form of digital manipulation? There are several points that connect here.

As far as empathy is concerned, *Ribbons* could profitably be brought into dialogue also with Harun Farocki's short film *Inextinguishable Fire* (1969) and Ai Weiwei's "reenactment" of the dead Alan Kurdi in 2016. Farocki's *Inextinguishable Fire* responds to the US invasion and

occupation of Vietnam in the mid-1960s, particularly focusing on the cruel napalm attacks on civilians. In the collective visual memory, the Vietnam War became synonymous with the mass-circulated photographs of burning children's bodies. Farocki's film is a collage, interspersing recordings of the artist performing for the camera with mass media footage. In the opening of the piece, Farocki burns his own skin with a cigarette butt, explaining to the viewer what napalm is capable of doing to a human body. The artist shows little to no signs of pain. The camera then jumps to an image of something of a bundled up body put on fire while a voice lists facts about the heat at which napalm burns in comparison to a cigarette, how fast it burns, the poisonous gases it emits and how it behaves on human skin. It is devastating. By forcing the viewer to witness the burning of his own flesh, Farocki puts the viewer's empathetic capacities to the test, daring us to imagine what napalm really is. It is didactical, very reasonable. However, Farocki does not seem interested in ushering empathy for himself. Rather, the artist worries that even if his audience comprehends, by way of imagination, how napalm works - do they care? In the opening shot of the film, Farocki recites:

"How can we show you napalm in action? And how can we show you the injuries caused by napalm? If we show you pictures of napalm burns, you'll close your eyes. First you'll close your eyes to the pictures. Then you'll close your eyes to the memory. Then you'll close your eyes to the facts. Then you'll close your eyes to the entire context. If we show you a person with napalm burns, we will hurt your feelings. If we hurt your feelings, you'll feel as if we'd tried napalm out on you, at your expense. We can give you only a hint of an idea of how napalm works."⁷

This monologue alone serves as an excellent prompt for exploring the politics of representation and engaged spectatorship together with students. Both Atkins and Farocki appeal to the vulnerability of bodies and minds, yet the artistic strategies employed lie at seemingly opposite sides of the spectrum. While Atkins explores digital 3D-modelling, Farocki works with his own live body. Both artists are concerned with mass-mediated images and visual catalogues but for seemingly different reasons. These appear to me fruitful points of departure for discussion in the classroom.

Another interesting case to bring to the table is Ai Weiwei's 'reenactment' of the photograph of Alan Kurdi, a drowned 3-year old Syrian boy washed up on a beach near the Turkish town of Bodrum. In September 2015, Kurdi and his family drowned in the Mediterranean sea during an attempted passage to the Greek island Kos.⁸ The photograph of the small corpse became representative of the international failure to secure the lives of civilians escaping the grim violence of ISIS. In terms of visual culture, the phenomenon is thus reminiscent of the photographs of napalm victims in Vietnam fifty years ago. In the following year of 2016, Ai Weiwei, a Chinese-born artist and political activist, staged himself lying face down on the beach of the Greek island where he was working on projects related to the migration crisis. The deed was documented by photojournalist Rohit Chawla for *India Today* and the final black-and white

⁷ "Inextinguishable Fire." *YouTube*, uploaded by my3rd3y3, 13 February 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJXJRNB-5kk

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Alan_Kurdi

photograph was exhibited at India Art Fair in New Delhi. Not surprisingly, Weiwei brewed up a storm of accusations on social media, many renouncing the act a tasteless profiting off of the suffering of unknown others.⁹ Meanwhile, is there a way to understand Weiwei's deed as an act of empathy? Is reenactment an appropriate way of 'putting yourself in the shoes of another'? Weiwei's deed offers an excellent opportunity to reflect on the significance of context surrounding an image. It adds yet another approach to the ethical dimensions of visual representations of suffering explored by Farocki.

There are many paths to go down and the possibilities for cross-reading and juxtaposition are boundless. However, these cases tell us little about the aspects of empathy supposedly inherent in making art and thinking about artistic processes together with others. While I have drawn primarily on philosophical and analytical discourses in visual culture, a practice-oriented study would require different research methods, engaging with the abundant empirical research on empathy that I have left out of this work.

5. Prologue

In *Inextinguishable Fire*, Harun Farocki alerts the viewer to the ambivalent nature of empathy: even though we know, or in some way grasp the suffering of others through empathy, what does it matter unless we are ready to act upon those insights? Is it in other words true that the world needs more empathy, as Obama had it?

In *Affective Relations: The transnational politics of empathy*, Carolyn Pedwell examines empathy in the context of transnational politics, relying primarily on texts by feminist and anti-racist thinkers. These discourses, previously marginalized, make visible the ambivalence of empathy as imbricated in complex relations of power. Several voices warn against treating empathy as the ultimate plaster that will stop the world from bleeding. There is a danger in glossing over difference in the longing for understanding and democratisation of feeling. Indeed, appeals to empathy might serve to uphold the very difference that we want to overcome, re-producing neo-colonialist narratives of 'empathiser' and 'sufferer'.

On the other hand however, in much of Pedwell's source material, empathy is envisioned as a radically unsettling experience, its emotional charge more intense than in the cases of sympathy or compassion (although it is pointed out that all of these are in some way oriented towards care). Thus, empathy might allow for us to truly be affected by others, allowing us also to see our own complicity in hierarchies of power, how we are affected by and affect others. According to Pedwell, this is where the transformative potential of empathy lies (2014:47-50). The emphasis here is on action, going over and beyond oneself out of empathy:

⁹ <https://news.artnet.com/market/ai-weiwei-reenactment-drowned-syrian-toddler-417275>

“... the suggestion is that, while ‘we’ might *theorise* social inequalities and commit ourselves to political responsibilities and obligations in the abstract, a transformation at the affective level is required to make ‘us’ actually feel, realise and act on them.” (2014:47)

Indeed, empathy is not in and of itself a commitment to reducing suffering and injustice in the world and should not be conflated with moral righteousness. An unusually empathic person is not automatically a morally just or kind person. Empathy loses all its transformative potential unless it is also underpinned by a vision of some kind of moral universe. If empathy with other beings is an initial yet insufficient impulse for transformation, perhaps what is called for is something as archaic-sounding as the courage to go over and beyond oneself - not unlike Antigone who, in burying her brother against the will of Creon, gave herself her own law.

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